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Scandal in Peruvian Catholic Church

by LADB Staff
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Peruvian prosecutors sought to bring charges against four bishops and Peru's ambassador to Spain for allegedly distributing false letters to the Vatican in a plot to defame the nation's controversial cardinal, Juan Luis Cipriani. Cipriani is the first member of the ultraconservative group Opus Dei to be elevated to the rank of cardinal in Latin America.

Prosecutorial allegations about a plot to link Cipriani to former intelligence chief Vladimiro Montesinos have led to a crisis within the hierarchy of Peru's Catholic Church, causing its leaders to call on government for "true justice."

Progressives accused of delivering forged documents

One of the accused is the ex-president of the Conferencia Episcopal Peruana (CEP), Luis Bambaren, a Jesuit prelate who is popular particularly in marginalized social sectors and is seen as a leader in the progressive wing of the Peruvian clergy. He, along with Jorge Carrion Pavlich, a bishop in the city of Puno, face accusations from prosecutors that they conspired to deliver three letters, later proven to be fake, to the Vatican, which "proved" Cipriani's involvement with the corruption endemic to the regime of former President Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000).

In 2001, tensions ran high between the government of President Alejandro Toledo and the Vatican when Fernando Olivera, then justice minister and currently Peru's ambassador to Spain, went to Rome with the letters. The government was forced to apologize to Cipriani after the Vatican stated that the incriminating letters which also implicated the papal nuncio in Lima, Archbishop Rino Passigato were false.

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Of the three letters, two were supposedly signed by Passigato and were directed to Montesinos to thank him for some donations and "your tireless interest in helping us." Montesinos is currently imprisoned and is facing multiple trials (see NotiSur, 2004-01-30). He served as Fujimori’s closest advisor during the authoritarian regime.

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The third letter, supposedly bearing Cipriani's signature, was sent to ex-President Valentin Paniagua (2000-2001), asking him to burn compromising videos. The letters purported to show that Cipriani sought the "elimination and incineration" of videotapes linking him to Montesinos after the church took money from the spy chief and requested an additional US$120,000 "donation."

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Internal church tensions burst into public view

Cipriani, however, has detractors outside of the alleged conspirators against him. At his first mass as cardinal in 2001, Cipriani was confronted by protesters chanting, "Christ is justice, not complicity," and "Cipriani and Montesinos, the same killers." After he served as a negotiator during a hostage crisis that ended in bloodshed in 1997, accusations that he had violated his neutrality and assisted intelligence services came into the open (see NotiSur, 1997-02-21, 1997-04-25 and 1997-05-23). The justice department's revelation of a plot reflects the great tensions within the Catholic Church and the discontent of some bishops at the naming of Cipriani as archbishop of Lima in 1999 and as the first Opus Dei cardinal in Peru in February 2001.
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Bishop Bambaren said that Olivera showed him the three letters in Rome in October 2001. Olivera's attitude "surprised me. Before showing me the letters, he said to me, 'I have come with the letters,' and in that moment I read them for the first time," Bambaren said to the Lima daily Peru 21 on Sept. 17. "It surprised me to read them because the content was very grave, because of the accusations they made regarding negotiations for thousands of dollars in the naming or promotion of cardinals," he said. The bishop says that he told Olivera that "the letters were not authentic," but that the ambassador did not listen and took the letters to the Vatican.

Olivera is a prominent figure in the Frente Independiente Moralizador (FIM), which had maintained a coalition with Toledo's Peru Posible (PP) party until earlier this year. Olivera, one of Toledo's strongest political allies, has faced other allegations of plotting against former Montesinos cronies (see NotiSur, 2004-02-13).
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The Public Ministry accused Puno Bishop Jorge Carrion and CEP officials Bishop Juan Javier Rojas and Bishop Augusto Dammert as co-authors of the forgeries against Cipriani and Passigato. The accusation also included Bambaren, now bishop emeritus of the Peruvian port city of Chimbote, for having knowledge of the forgeries and coordinating with Olivera to have them delivered to Rome.

The ministry accuses Bambaren of "demonstrating disinterest in investigating the 2001 case while he was president of the CEP" and for "being a presumed beneficiary in the removal of the archbishop and cardinal of Lima, Juan Luis Cipriani, and being likely to succeed him in said office." The prosecutors' stance against a supposed plot to defame Cipriani is a turnaround from their previous investigations this spring when they subpoenaed the cardinal to testify regarding the death of his predecessor.

Cipriani indignantly announced in April that he had been subpoenaed to testify in an investigation into the alleged murder of his predecessor, Augusto Vargas Alzamora, at the hands of Montesinos. "Mr. Prosecutor, open your mysterious files and say who mentioned me in a fictitious event because
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Until Cipriani’s complaint, few Peruvians would have suspected that Vargas Alzamora, a liberal Jesuit, was the victim of foul play. Most still do not. He died in September 2000, four months after suffering a debilitating cerebral hemorrhage that left him bedridden. But Cipriani’s comments and the possibility of homicide set Peru abuzz.

The Lima rumor mill has cranked into action as Peruvians recalled that Vargas Alzamora and Cipriani were often at loggerheads because of Vargas Alzamora’s strong criticism of Fujimori’s authoritarian methods. During the past decade, Cipriani grabbed headlines with his support of security forces in Peru’s dirty war against far-leftist Sendero Luminoso guerrillas. He said in 1991 that most human rights groups were apologists for Marxist and Maoist organizations. He also offered Fujimori staunch backing during the ex-president's 1990-2000 autocratic government although he bitterly opposed Fujimori's family-planning programs, warning that free condoms would "turn the entire country into a brothel."

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